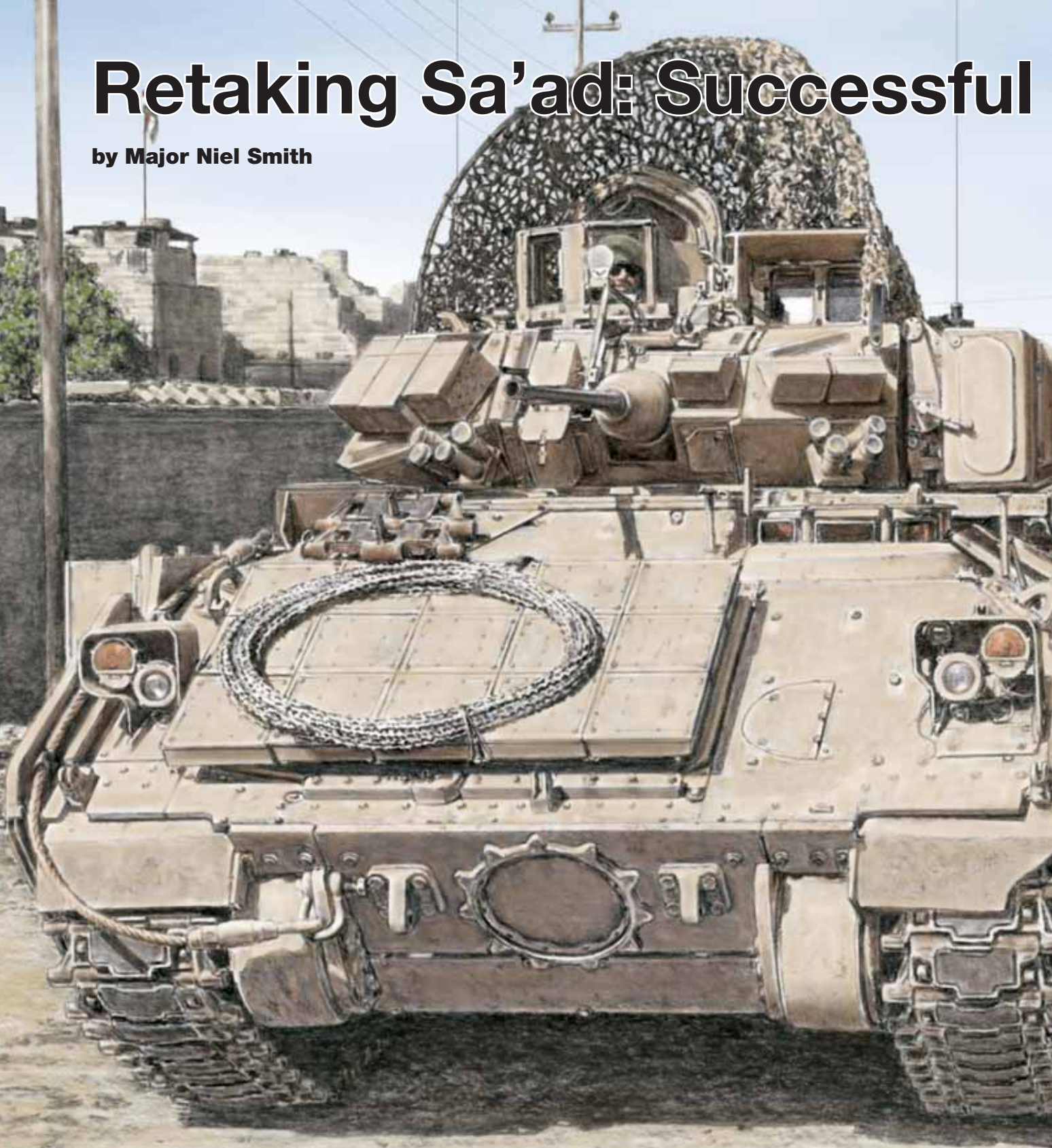# Retaking Sa'ad: Successful

by Major Niel Smith

Counterinsurgency is difficult. As a force, we have only begun to rediscover and process the hard lessons of the past, which we largely discarded in our march to build the perfect maneuver and combat force. As a result, the Army is struggling with "nonkinetic" operations — the Army's entire force structure is designed for kinetic operations, leaving commanders at all levels with few "nonkinetic" tools at their disposal.

During 2006, Team Battle, 2d Battalion, 37th (2-37) Armor successfully set conditions that resulted in pacifying insurgent-dominated territory without fighting any major pitched battles in Tal Afar. The soldiers of Team Battle applied principles learned from training, scholarship, and hard experience to achieve short-term, and hopefully long-term, success in one of Iraq's most difficult cities.

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Counterinsurgency in Tal Afar

HARMON

Following Operation Iraqi Freedom, the northwestern border and farming city of Tal Afar was a relatively peaceful and stable haven in Iraq. During 2004 and 2005, the city emerged as both a hub of insurgent infiltration from Syria to Mosul and as a refuge for insurgents fleeing the campaigns in Anbar province. The city was cleared during a major operation in November 2004 by 2d Squadron, 14th Cavalry Regiment, and again in September 2005 by the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) accompanied by the 3d Iraqi Army (IA) Division. The 3d ACR followed up on its success by establishing company- and platoon-sized U.S./IA outposts throughout the city to restore order and allow the reformation of civil government and security forces to rebuild. The conflict also included a bitter campaign by Sunni supremacists to exterminate the Shia presence in town, which had the effect of polarizing the populace along sectarian lines.

Our unit, Team Battle, 2-37 Armor, assumed responsibility for west and southwest Tal Afar on 14 February 2006. It consisted of a motorized tank platoon, a dual-purpose tank/motorized platoon, a mechanized infantry platoon, and a combat engineer platoon. The team's specific tasks included ensuring mobility on the alternate supply route (ASR) in its sector, developing IA and Iraqi Police (IP) capabilities, and defeating the insurgents' ability to operate in its area of operations (AO). Approximately half of the sector was occupied by friendly tribes, mostly Shia, who formed a partnership with coalition forces to protect their interests and restore a fair government to Tal Afar.

We were fortunate to take over from Fox Troop, 2d Squadron, 3d ACR; they had developed extraordinary relationships with the local populace and tribal sheiks in our sector. Fox Troop had also established U.S./IA platoon-sized patrol bases at strategic locations throughout its sector. By combining aggressive patrolling, engagement of local leaders, and development of human intelligence (HUMINT) from the local population, 3d ACR virtually eliminated insurgent control in the southern and extreme western parts of Tal Afar, and had began building inroads to the mixed tribal and sectarian neighborhoods of central and northern Tal Afar at the time of their relief in place.

As a new commander, I was faced with a number of opportunities and potential courses of action to build on Fox Troop's success. It appeared there were three possible directions to take. The first involved continuing efforts in the mixed Sunni/Shia central area, known as the Wahda neighborhood. Although Fox Troop had some measure of success in that area, there were limited options to improve the situation, other than increasing Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) presence. Additionally, the neighborhood was difficult to isolate and was bordered by insurgent support zones to the north and east. The neighborhood was almost fully occupied with a mixed population of 60 percent Sunni and 40 percent Shia, which resulted in a great deal of tension. Fox Troop managed to largely pacify the neighborhood and ISF managed to maintain the uneasy peace between the tribes and sects. Although the temptation to expand the "oil spot" was extremely tempting, focused effort in that area would not have lead to major gains elsewhere in sector.

The second option was to begin operations in the central portion of our sector, a heavily Sunni area known as Rubiyah, where

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there was a strong insurgent cell focused on attacking the Iraqi police. One of the greatest advantages in this area was a local sheik who was willing to cooperate with coalition forces behind closed doors. However, intimidation was high and local support was not especially strong. Complicating the situation even further was the difficult task of isolating the area and limiting insurgent freedom of movement.

The third neighborhood was known as Sa'ad, a mostly empty battleground neighborhood that had seen extensive fighting over the past year. The neighbor houses were nearly two-thirds empty and the remaining residents were almost all Sunni, after the Shia residents had been displaced during the fighting. It was a known hotspot of insurgent activity and support. However, it was easily isolated, bordered the other two neighborhoods, and we could leverage existing tribes to remigrate into the neighborhood, if we provided adequate security. A plan to enter this neighborhood was not to be undertaken lightly; many coalition forces and ISF casualties had been taken. Additionally, there were few local informants or residents to co-opt.

Of the three options, we decided on Sa'ad because it possessed some unique characteristics that could be exploited. First, the neighborhood could easily be isolated using existing barriers and security forces, and the natural wadi system reinforced the obstacle plan.

Geographically, the neighborhood was triangular shaped and slightly less than a 1-kilometer square. The ASR bordered on the west; the main supply route, a major east-west city road, bordered on the south; and a deep, but passable, wadi system provided easy infiltration from the insurgent-dominated neighborhood of Quadisyah from the east.

A further analysis of the human terrain was also striking. The neighborhood was once almost evenly divided between Sunni and Shia families. The neighborhood originally began in the late 1980s as an upscale area for Baathist supporters and their families. During 2004 and 2005, insurgent and sectarian tensions caused all but a handful of Shia families to flee the neighborhood after an intense sectarian intimidation campaign. Many Sunni families fled to avoid being caught in the ensuing crossfire between insurgents, police, U.S. Army, and sectarian groups. By October 2005, the neighborhood was approximately 65 percent abandoned. These structures allowed freedom of movement, bed-down locations, meeting rooms, and cache storage for insurgents. The neighborhood also bordered ASR Santa Fe, the main logistics line to forward operating base (FOB) Sykes and an improvised explosive device (IED) hotspot.

The history of the area also affected the unit's mission. The 3d ACR patrolled the neighborhood regularly, but the density of empty houses occupied by an intimidated populace allowed the enemy to operate relatively freely in the area. Numerous armored vehicles were lost or damaged in the neighborhood and immediate vicinity due to large IEDs. Houses that may have been used as ISF outposts or by Shia supporters to meet with coalition forces were often destroyed using bags of urea nitrate fertilizer. The city's fledgling Iraqi police force refused to operate in the neighborhood due to the perceived strength of insurgent forces there. A lone Iraqi army patrol base occupied the area, but was largely ineffective at curbing insurgent operations in the area due to its small size and isolated location. One abortive attempt in late 2005 at establishing a second U.S./IA patrol base in the neighborhood resulted in a vehicle-borne IED (VBIED) attack,

which was fortunately intercepted and detonated prematurely due to an alert Iraqi army soldier. Following the VBIED attack, the base was removed and the unit returned to regular patrolling in the neighborhood and prepared for relief in place with 2-37 Armor.

What really tipped the scale was the risks-and-benefits analysis of investing fully in each neighborhood. The analysis was conducted using three main criteria: the effect on insurgents if we succeeded/the effect on insurgents if we failed; suitability of the urban and cultural terrain; and the ability to execute with forces available. When applied against these standards, completing success in Wahda would consume too many resources without significantly affecting insurgents' ability to conduct operations elsewhere in sector.

Rubiyah's chances of success were assessed as low due to the lack of ability to rapidly "change" the cultural terrain, which was based on a populace that supported the anti-Iraqi forces (AIF) and the difficultly of controlling access in and out of the area.

Despite its status as the most dangerous area in our AO, Sa'ad was our best chance for success. First and foremost, insurgents

"We had little chance of winning popular support without becoming a constant part of the neighborhood. We also lacked sufficient combat power to permanently invest in the neighborhood and maintain security across the zone, which made handing off to ISF a necessity. This also supported the theater goal of enabling ISF to take the lead; however, the real problem was ensuring ISF was competent and capable of conducting local counterinsurgency operations."

would lose a major support zone, which would limit their ability to maneuver in the northwest part of the city, store tactical caches, and use bed-down locations. It would also remove the "support zone" for AIF operations in the Wahda neighborhood to the south, and limit the AIF's ability to destabilize that neighborhood. Finally, it would remove the IED threat from approximately a kilometer of our ASR, increasing the security of coalition forces and logistics convoys.

Visualizing the Fight

Once we decided where to act, the question turned to strategy. First, we knew intelligence would be key to success and allow us to conduct targeted operations. With a neighborhood of displaced people, HUMINT would be critical to discerning AIF from intimidated civilians. We needed to disrupt the insurgents' ability to counter our initial actions by clearing the area prior to follow-on operations. Otherwise, we risked losing any initial toe-holds into the neighborhood.

Following my first tour in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), the emphasis became withdrawing to larger bases further removed from the population with the intent of taking away the "irritant" of coalition force presence. While well meaning, in practice, we abandoned many areas to insurgent patrols by failing to provide daily security before ISF were capable of standing up.

We had little chance of winning popular support without becoming a constant part of the neighborhood. We also lacked sufficient combat power to permanently invest in the neighborhood and maintain security across the zone, which made handing off to ISF a necessity. This also supported the theater goal of

enabling ISF to take the lead; however, the real problem was ensuring ISF was competent and capable of conducting local counterinsurgency operations. The Iraqi army was largely tasked out maintaining their existing operational set, given their liberal leave policy. Fortunately, the city was in the process of receiving over 1,500 new Iraqi police officers who were trained at the Jordanian police academy. Once established, they would be the focus of our main security force, since they were drawn from the local community and some were displaced residents of Sa'ad. Our task would be to ensure they were well prepared and equipped for the task at hand.

Finally, we realized that the ultimate goal and arbiter of long-term stability in the sector would be the return of displaced families. Besides being a humanitarian and positive information operations goal, the remigration of friendly families under an umbrella of joint security would prevent terrorists from using neighborhoods to support their purposes. To do this, we had to leverage relationships established with local tribes.

After considering the above, we settled on the following campaign strategy:

- Phase I included recruiting and developing local informants from the displaced populace to provide an accurate picture of AIF supporters, safe houses, and cache locations.

- Phase II consisted of a cordon and search of the neighborhood to locate insurgents and disrupt insurgent logistics in the neighborhood.

- Phase III established a platoon-sized U.S. patrol base in the sector to provide continuous presence and security to the populace.

- Phase IV consisted of establishing an Iraqi police station and transitioning daily security to ISF.

- Phase V was to convince the tribes representing displaced families and civilians to return to their old neighborhoods under the new security umbrella.

Phase I: Building the Picture

Developing our intelligence picture was the first major hurdle. This usually difficult task was made easier for us by our predecessor unit. We were fortunate to inherit a large network of informants and contacts developed by 3d ACR during their operations. Despite this, we lacked a cohesive current intelligence picture of the threat facing us in the Sa'ad neighborhood. In fact, we knew very little about the insurgents in that area. We were also reluctant to rush into a dangerous area until we felt comfortable operating in our sector — the unit's first and last 30 days in Iraq

are the most dangerous. We implemented an aggressive reconnaissance and surveillance plan to learn the neighborhood while conducting patrols throughout the AO.

Using established relationships from Fox Troop, we spread the word that we were seeking knowledgeable individuals who knew the Sa'ad neighborhood and its resident insurgents. To directly reach the people, we identified areas where displaced Sa'ad residents resided and spread the word during dismounted patrols that we were seeking information to drive out the insurgency. In coordination with our tactical HUMINT teams (THT), we slowly developed a more specific intelligence picture of the neighborhood, but still did not have the details required to begin operations effectively. To compensate, we increased patrolling in Sa'ad, attempting to elicit information from its residents. Despite great effort, it was apparent that the residents were unable or unwilling to cooperate with us due to terrorist domination of the area.

A breakthrough success occurred when a new informant contact was introduced through a friend. He heard we were seeking to clear the neighborhood and represented a loose coalition of 20 displaced families. The informant produced a spectacular hand-drawn map of the neighborhood, identifying each house. Annotated in Arabic were the locations of known AIF supporters, possible cache locations, and friendly residents. We were excited to get this information, but wary of its details, especially from a first-time informant. In conjunction with our other informants and the S2 shop, we were able to substantially confirm the information's validity.

With information in hand, we began to set the tactical conditions by reinforcing an obstacle plan set by 3d ACR in the neighborhood. We reinforced existing obstacles and blocked all exit routes from the neighborhood, with the exception of one, which was manned by an Iraqi army checkpoint. This operation forced all vehicles to be searched before they entered or exited the neighborhood. Isolating the neighborhood allowed us to better cordon the area and at least restrict infiltration of more weapons to the neighborhood.

Phase II: Cordon and Search

There is some argument in the military community over the applicability and usefulness of large scale "cordon and search" or "cordon and knock" techniques. However, we found that when properly executed, they are useful tools during counterinsurgency operations when combined with intelligence, a clear task and purpose, and targeted information operations. We envisioned an initial cordon and search as an enabler that would allow us to potentially trap known terrorists inside the neighborhood and flesh out existing caches. The disruptive effect would provide us the opportunity to establish our operations base inside the neighborhood.

Having an intelligence picture provided us with the ability to plan a detailed cordon and search of more than 200 houses. We integrated with 1st Battalion, 2d Iraqi Army Brigade, 3d Division to execute the operation. The battalion's acting commander planned the operation in strict secrecy, in conjunction with Battle Company, beginning two weeks from execution. We decided to conduct the operation on a Friday to catch as many people at home as possible and selected 10 March as our target date.

The plan was relatively straightforward. Three U.S. platoons, integrated with three IA companies, would establish a cordon at 0630 hours around the neighborhood to prevent possible escapes. Once established, two IA companies, accompanied by one of our infantry platoons, would conduct a deliberate block-by-block clearance of all houses. All males between ages 13 and 70 would be directed to report to the centrally located primary school, which would serve as the command post for the operation. Having the males report to the school served two purposes: it prevented terrorists from maneuvering inside our cordon; and alerted search teams to regard any male found in a house, on the streets, or hiding as suspect after the cordon was in place.

One of our tank platoons and the company trains were assigned to secure and operate the screening process. A carefully selected panel of informants, in conjunction with our "blacklist," would identify insurgents and their supporters for further questioning by a mobile interrogation team (MIT), which was on site to gain actionable intelligence. Those not identified as insurgents would be given the opportunity to speak with a THT.

Tactical psychological operations (PSYOPS) teams would provide initial broadcast messages and later help distribute information operations (IO) messages to screened personnel for effects mitigation. An explosive ordnance detachment and military working dog team would assist in detecting and reducing any ordnance found. Finally, aviation would provide support and observation during the cordon and search process, especially in the critical early phase. We planned to screen 200 to 300 males, based on our population estimate in the neighborhood.

A detailed combined arms rehearsal was secretly conducted in an empty warehouse at our joint U.S./IA company base. Each participating element and IA commander rehearsed their roles in the mission, which later proved invaluable during the critical cordon establishment phase. Having had coordination difficulties in prior operations with our IA counterparts, the detailed rehearsal proved vital in ensuring IA leaders understood their roles in the plan.

The raid was executed as planned at 0630 hours on 10 March. Tactical surprise was achieved as the cordon was emplaced, effectively sealing the neighborhood. The search forces deployed while the school was being set up as a processing center. Our infantry platoon and the IA companies began their search in conjunction with the tactical PSYOPS team's broadcasts. By the end of the search, more than 500 males had been processed, which nearly doubled our estimate. Screening and processing the males took more than 8 hours at the school and we kept the cordon in place the entire time. As it turned out, we severely underestimated the number of residents and the time it would take to process them. An IED cache and a 500-pound unexploded joint direct-attack munition (JDAM) were discovered during the operation. Although we learned many lessons for future cordon and search procedures, the basic template used during this operation was the foundation used for operations elsewhere in the city.

A grand total of 63 detainees were identified for further investigation regarding insurgent activity. We subdivided the group into three categories: AIF leaders, AIF soldiers, and common criminals. The leaders were taken into immediate U.S. custody, the soldiers into IA custody, and the criminals were handed over to the police. The breakdown was 11 into U.S. custody, 20 into IA custody, and 32 into police custody. Statements were immediately solicited from the detainees.

Following the operation, we circulated names and photos of the detainees to ISF, who provided witness statements regarding the detainees. Almost one-half of the detainees, including 9 of the 11 U.S. detainees, were sent to prison for eventual trial by Iraqi authorities. Among the detainees were alleged financiers, IED manufacturers, and direct-action cell leaders.

The operation achieved its intended purpose — disrupting insurgents operating in the neighborhood. The time provided by this operation would allow us to occupy a patrol base in the neighborhood. There was not an enemy-generated significant event in the neighborhood for the next 7 days.

Phase III: Building the Patrol Base

With the insurgent leadership and direct-action cells disrupted in the Sa'ad neighborhood, we had a small window of opportunity during which to establish our patrol base. A patrol base established in the heart of the neighborhood would allow constant patrols and limit insurgent freedom of movement. It was also a visible demonstration of our commitment to win over insurgents and provide security in the neighborhood.

On 14 March, we established Patrol Base "Battle Dwarf" (because of its small size), which was occupied by our infantry platoon. Located in the most dangerous section of the neighborhood, we emplaced barriers along three sides of the patrol base and a wire/spike-strip combo to protect against VBIED attacks such as the one Fox Troop endured. We reinforced our building's windows and roof with sandbags. Kevlar blankets were draped against the windows to guard against shrapnel from mortar attacks or VBIEDs. A platoon quick-reaction force (QRF) was maintained and on standby for quick response to any attack. We rehearsed multiple routes and alternate entry locations to reinforce the base, attempting to avoid "first responder" attacks.

The platoon primarily conducted dismounted operations from the patrol base at random intervals. The patrols conducted thorough searches of empty houses, drank chai (tea) with locals, and distributed the IO message that we were there to stay and to remove insurgent forces. In the first 3 days, major weapons and IED caches were found, including Motorola radios, homemade rocket-propelled grenades, and plastic explosives.

On 18 March, the enemy struck for the first time. A dismounted patrol had just returned and noted that there was no one present on the streets. Several adjacent houses and a small store had closed down midday. Our S2 also reported that an attack was underway somewhere in the city. This information led to an increased awareness and alerted the guards at the patrol base.

Suddenly, the roof guards indicated that some children, who usually played along the protective wire on the mounted avenue of approach, pulled back two strands of concertina to create a small opening in the wire. Immediately, a small car drove at high speed through the hole and across the protective spike strip emplaced about 70 meters from the patrol base, which failed to stop the car. The car was immediately engaged from the rooftop with M240B machine gun fire. The car hugged the extreme side of the near wall as it approached, allowing the rooftop gunner to engage only the passenger side. The soldiers on guard called for everyone to take immediate cover. As they did, the VBIED rolled

to a stop near the front door of the base and after a 2 to 3 second pause, detonated. The blast collapsed the outer wall and shattered every window on the block.

Thankfully, all the carefully emplaced force-protection measures held. The Kevlar blankets draped over the windows stopped the shrapnel, and the sandbags and concrete construction protected the soldiers from the explosion. Due to the alert guards, everyone was able to seek some measure of protective cover. Pieces of the car were found more than 100 meters from the point of detonation.

The company QRF responded to the event, as rehearsed, within 5 minutes, and assisted in establishing a perimeter around the site. The remainder of the company quickly followed and nearby units from Company A, 2-37 Armor responded immediately. The IA and IP closed all checkpoints into the area to prevent a possible secondary attack on the responding elements. Post-blast analysis indicated that the explosive was a combination of military rounds and homemade explosives.

No one was killed in the explosion, but four soldiers received minor wounds. We immediately began reconsolidating the gear and equipment inside. After consulting with the battalion commander, we decided to immediately re-establish a new base to reinforce the message that we would not be deterred. The new base would be manned by our engineer platoon while the infantry reorganized from the blast and took a break. Prior to establishing Battle Dwarf, we had explored several houses as potential base locations and chose one of these as our new base, which was located about a block from the VBIED site and provided a commanding view of the area. The battalion headquarters company brought an emergency class IV push, and reinforcements

from A Company, 2-37 Armor provided initial security during the establishment of our new base, aptly named "Battle Phoenix."

The enemy did not expect us to re-establish so quickly. They likely anticipated that we would withdraw from the area, as their attack in December had achieved. Patrols immediately resumed, and they located caches and IEDs almost daily. A HUMINT tip led to a suspected IED on 21 March, and as it was being explored, it detonated and caused minor injury to one soldier and destroyed a multifunctional agile remote-controlled robot (MARCBOT).

On 25 March, our infantry platoon was conducting a routine patrol when a homemade IED exploded against a dismounted patrol, causing minor injuries to a soldier's hand. In this case, the patrol identified the triggermen and chased them as they fled across the wadi to the east. The IA apprehended the individuals and turned them over to our patrol. One of the two individuals was a battalion target and an IED cell organizer. Their detention resulted in a quiet phase in the neighborhood and we continued to expand patrol frequency and duration, resulting in the discovery of several caches. Other significant finds included a cell member who later provided critical information leading to the detention of other high-value targets.

On 6 and 7 April, the base received 60mm fire from a mortar team in response to the arrival of IP to our patrol base. On 8 April, a patrol was sent to establish an ambush on the likely point of origin (POO). A buried 120mm mortar, with homemade explosives, exploded against a dismounted patrol that was sent to investigate the POO, killing one soldier and severely wounding another.

The enemy patterned us and used our tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) against us. Another IED attack, against an

M113 sent to investigate a possible IED, wounded one of our soldiers. We did not let these tragic events deter us from the objective; however, we evaluated and shifted our tactics to better employ IED countermeasures, reduce predictability, and increase ISF cooperation.

At this stage, we began to notice subtle changes in the neighborhood. People were becoming friendlier and more receptive, although HUMINT tips were not increasing. Our company leaders determined that we had reached our limit with U.S.-only forces and more ISF were needed to move the project forward from its current tense stalemate, which was consuming one-third of the company's combat power that was beginning to be needed elsewhere in sector.

Phase IV: Transition and Partnership with Iraqi Security Forces

After nearly a month of operations, we were setting the conditions for the IP to re-enter the neighborhood. When we began operations, the city was still receiving, equipping, and integrating new police. Additionally, they had very few officers and experienced police; however, by mid-April, enough police had arrived to establish operations in Sa'ad under our supervision and support. The city police chief arranged for an initial force of 50 IP to conduct joint operations. We established a police outpost on 4 April, which was collocated with Battle Phoenix. The local police station chief ensured his most experienced and aggressive police officers occupied the base, even replacing those who failed to perform to standard. They soon began combined patrols with U.S. forces several times a day.

Given the largely Sunni neighborhood and mostly Shiite police force, there existed a large possibility for sectarian tension, revenge attacks, or further violence. We were extremely fortunate to work with someone of the caliber of the local police chief. He deftly walked the tightrope of being firm, but fair, with the residents, and disciplined the police if they operated inappropriately. He was a local from the neighborhood and was well respected in the community. More importantly, he sincerely cared about bringing security to Tal Afar and wanted his neighborhood families to return to their homes.

Over a two-week period, we shifted from U.S.-led and -dominated patrols to independent IP patrols. We noticed residents becoming more positive and we soon began receiving tips and intelligence from them. Initially wary, the locals soon warmed and later embraced the new IP presence once it was established that they were not a sectarian hit squad. We once again saw progress in the neighborhood after stalling in early April.

The police chief was so enthused by the success in Sa'ad that he moved his police headquarters into the neighborhood. He requested we place a triple-strand concertina barrier across the eastern wadi to canalize AIF movement to the north or south, where he would establish IP checkpoints. We resourced the wire and emplaced it as a joint operation with the IA and IP to build cooperation between the forces. Al-though we initially doubted the effect of the barrier, we were pleasantly surprised when the locals reacted positively to the wire and insurgent activity dropped measurably.

On 22 April, we began transitioning Battle Phoenix to the IP following two weeks of joint train-up. The IP continued constant mounted and dismounted operations around the area while we supported daily from Combat Observation Post (COP) Battle. Their independent operations resulted in many additional cache finds and a few detentions, but most importantly, we had achieved a major goal — transitioning primary responsibility to ISF while supported by U.S. forces. This had major positive effects in the community and among the local police forces. The only remaining challenge was to convince the displaced populace to return home.

Phase V: Returning Displaced Civilians

One of the most complex aspects of the operation was the intense negotiations surrounding the return of residents to the neighborhood, which began shortly after the original patrol base was established. The sheiks were very cautious about encouraging families to return for fear of insurgent attacks. As a result, they initially made some unreasonable demands such as maintaining a militia in the streets to provide security.

Convincing local sheiks that the area was safe was no small undertaking. In Iraq, perception is reality and the locals heard about casualties and car bombs, but not about the enemy fleeing the area in response to our operations and that ISF were controlling the neighborhood. This was another one of those areas in which the local chief of police played an invaluable role. Since he was a local resident and related to several powerful local personalities, his assistance was critical in gaining support from the tribes. He did so at considerable risk to his own prestige; if the

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endeavor failed, his position in the community would be reduced and his job imperiled.

After some intense negotiations between security forces, the city mayor, and the sheiks, an agreement was reached. The persuasive arguments by the police chief and mayor won the day. Only males would return to a limited portion of the neighborhood in the beginning to "test the waters." The IA, IP, and U.S. forces would provide route security to the neighborhood (a concern for residents), and the residents were allowed to keep AK-47s in their homes to protect themselves. If the neighborhood was as secure as they were told, they would return more people and families.

Our first attempt at moving in individuals on 18 April was a failure. The males that returned brandished their weapons in the streets and caused some trouble with local residents. A severe sandstorm and IED reduced the number of forces we were able to provide. The sheiks, angered by a perceived lack of support and under pressure about the weapons incidents, withdrew from the area.

Negotiations over returning the residents soon began again and after some delays and mediation, a more detailed and specific agreement was reached. Heavy security would be provided by U.S. and ISF forces units for the first 48 hours, and in return, the returning residents agreed not to brandish weapons or cause any trouble with existing residents. The chief of police proved critical to reassuring the Iraqis about providing enough security from ISF.

On 27 April, approximately 50 males returned to the southwest portion of the neighborhood under heavy U.S. and ISF security, including aviation. Eager to avoid a repeat of the attempt nearly 10 days earlier, I collocated with the main Shia Sheik at the site to immediately resolve any problems. Fortunately, the entire move took place without incident. During the initial two weeks, we maintained constant vigilance in the neighborhood, especially cautious about sectarian violence or retribution between the returned residents.

Continuing Stability

Maintaining our success was as big a challenge as achieving it. Securing the neighborhood required daily attention from the unit. In mid-June, we felt security conditions were permissive enough to conduct a town hall meeting, with leaders from the neighborhood, to elect a muktar (mayor) and address any grievances that local leaders may have. We conducted our first meeting on 20 June with great success.

Fortunately, none of our fears came to pass. AIF activity remained minimal to nonexistent in the neighborhood. As word spread, families arrived daily, with some returnees traveling over 150 kilometers to reoccupy their homes. The ISF maintained a constant presence and manned checkpoints in the neighborhood. U.S. forces maintained almost daily joint patrols in the area, but refocused on developing the logistics and administrative skills of the IP and IA bases. The ongoing security of Sa'ad now rests almost entirely in Iraqi hands with U.S. forces providing "overwatch."

The operation had great second- and third-order effects in the Wahda and Rubiyah neighborhoods. Removing the insurgent base in Sa'ad denied insurgents easy entry into Wahda. In Rubiyah, residents petitioned for a police base similar to the one in Sa'ad. Our unit and the local police were happy to comply and the program was expanded in other company sectors.

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Strategically, the operation became well known throughout Tal Afar and the reputation of the local IP and IA were enhanced by its success. We began focused civil-military operations (CMO) projects to support returning residents, which included "start up money" to repair homes damaged by heavy fighting over the past year. We paid nearly $15,000 in claims to assist the families courageous enough to return.

Currently, employment projects are underway with the support of the muktar and the ISF to provide an economic base for residents, including a water well, school refurbishment, and street lighting. Despite this progress, gaining reconstruction dollars is a slow and bureaucratic process, and often the expectation of the Iraqis cannot be met by U.S. forces under the current funding model.

Lessons Learned

Like most successful operations, a clear commander's intent was vital to our success. When the intent is practical and clear, soldiers can tailor their actions to achieve the mission. Likewise, a clear vision in the commander's mind of what he expects the endstate to be assists in evaluating and processing variations and changes to the tactics while maintaining the overall strategic focus.

The presence of force in neighborhoods and communities is fundamental to a successful counterinsurgency. By living among the people and learning their way of life, we gained credibility and demonstrated resolve to stay and solve problems. The enemy expended great effort to expel us from the neighborhood because we were a threat to their operational base. Once the terrorists and residents realized we were not leaving, we gained the confidence of the people, who trusted we could protect them from the terrorists. Eventually, we transferred that confidence to their local police force, which was a huge change. If we had not established bases inside the neighborhoods, we could not have achieved as much as we did.

Living in the city requires careful assessment of how to protect soldiers against the threat. As demonstrated by patrol base Battle Dwarf, force protection can be underestimated and the enemy will analyze and target your weaknesses. The structure of urban neighborhoods and houses make it nearly impossible to guard against every threat — from a thrown hand grenade a few houses over to a suicide VBIED attack. Operating inside a neighborhood assumes some soldier risk in the short term for long-term security. When casualties began to mount, I doubted the wisdom of the strategy. Perhaps sensing my unease, a young infantry soldier told me: "Sir, if we weren't in the neighborhood, we'd just be getting blown up more outside it." His comment unwittingly framed the issue perfectly.

There are key measures ground commanders can take to minimize risks and casualties. Commanders must understand and employ their IED countermeasure systems properly. These systems must be strategically placed in all patrols — planned and deliberately placed much like a crew-served weapon. We also learned that a .50-caliber machine gun is required at all entry control point (ECP) locations or potential VBIED sites. Barriers and other obstacles must be reinforced; local residents must be briefed and warned of the potentially lethal consequences of tampering with defensive obstacles. Children must be ruthlessly kept away from all ECPs and guard points. Finally, dismounted patrols and mounted patrols must vary routes, times, and movement methods such as wall-hopping, bounding teams, and rooftop jumping.

The ISF was key to our operational success. Understanding the capabilities and limitations of the Iraqi forces in your area is vi-

tal. Iraqi army forces in our sector were great for operations but weak in daily counterinsurgency. Iraqi police were highly effective in the daily fight, but due to discipline and equipment problems, were incapable of undertaking large operations. Joint patrols and training at all levels reinforce their legitimacy and ensure their balance regardless of sectarian orientations. Taking ISF key leaders to bilateral meetings (BILATs) and developing direct relationships with local leaders resulted in major atmospherics improvement in our area. Some Iraqi army leaders are not accustomed to "answering to" or "working with" civilians. Direct contact between local sheiks and Iraqi leaders eliminated potential sectarian differences and resolved issues much more effectively than playing the "middle man," which allowed both sides to scapegoat U.S. forces and avoid accountability. Sometimes compromise with Iraqi leaders may be necessary to accomplish the objective — even using methods you may not agree with. Keep in mind that the Iraqis have to live with the result; allowing the Iraqis to "design the solution" creates ownership and facilitates success.

To win in counterinsurgency, the local population must execute the long-term answer; our role is to set conditions that allow Iraqis to independently succeed. In Sa'ad, we set conditions for the return of ISF, who were fearful of operating in a dangerous neighborhood, which, in turn, set conditions for the return of displaced residents. The continued peace in the neighborhood is a testament to what ISF can do when U.S. forces serve in a committed support role.

Finally, economic prosperity is the motivator for maintaining success in a counterinsurgency environment. A competent and targeted CMO effort to reward those who took risks and gave information helps win the fight. To paraphrase, dollars are the same as bullets in counterinsurgency, but are often extremely difficult to get quickly. A colleague summarized it well, "I have almost unlimited capacity to employ violence, but little ability to employ nonviolence." Gaining nonkinetic economic support remains the biggest challenge to commanders throughout Iraq, and will continue to be a major issue until there is an improved process that empowers front-line commanders to employ dollars as easily as they employ bullets.

The Sa'ad neighborhood campaign was an ambitious attempt to re-take ground held by the enemy. The success of the operation required us to "break the FOB" mentality and live among the people. Respectable locals will unhesitatingly support U.S. and ISF forces, if they are provided security. It is correct to say that Tal Afar had a unique set of circumstances that assisted in our unit's success. Deployed units can help themselves by assessing ethnic and tribal histories and dynamics to shape a strategy for success. I hope commanders and planners can apply the principles we learned at a heavy cost in Tal Afar to protect other areas from insurgent control.

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